

The Lore of the Land

Gerry Kearns

The force drives through the green bud unfurling it as a spiral track that stretches into its leaf. The rising and falling of the moon across the night sky traces arcs that each month reach a little higher until after the sixth they fall again leaving in the memory of the mind's eye the whorls of the upper half of a spiral. With winter the earth dies and later springs again into life. Animals, birds and fish come in their herds and flocks and shoals and then they leave. Giant solar and lunar clocks are read from the shadows of standing stones thrown against notches chiseled into other stones. The wells and springs were banked about to mark as the apertures of birth the fissures through which the water of life made good its healthy bond. A brilliant dome is topped to a hill, lolling out a tongue to sluice in the dawnlight of the turning of the year, the shortest day, as the earth's promise of rebirth is nervously awaited. Massive stones like dead giants are shouldered by other standing rocks.

And who might join the ululations and narcotic frenzy that danced around these sites, might hear the tales or sing the songs that gave the name to each hill and bog and track and field, might revere the fecundity of the earth, sunned and watered from its above? It is the work of ear and tongue and memory, tested in the faith of renewing the trust in soil with sowing, of hoping to be there and then to meet the travelling fish. It is the authority of wise women and poets, claimed in the name of ancestors and goddesses, the diplomacy of a pact between people and place: earth-care.

But it was broken. The forests were cleared and giant deer hunted away. The goddess was canonized and fecundity anathematised as sin. Today made no new link to the chain of tradition and, leaving it behind, processed with Latin book into a new landscape of parishes and dioceses, and counties and poor law unions, of plantations and tenant farms. Law and lore were drained from the land. And when the potato failed, the earth was blamed and finally shunned, even while the hand that held the ladle refused to fill their bowls.

And yet, alongside the round-towers that rang out from above this new order, the Christians also made many modest churches and oratories, a gospel of local humility rather than episcopal veneration where churches were dedicated to saints of parochial rather than European or biblical repute. The holy wells continued to promise a magic beyond the sacramental. And although the towns were garrisoned, and prison'd, and laundry'd, and asylum'd, against those granite walls children bounced balls and sang songs, and the mad puck goat made mischief of the trousers of the army officer. And when the dreams of children were allowed wander as the hopes of their elders, some in a Gaelic Revival attended to the twilight of the gods and thought they heard an older promise.

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